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**Graduate Perceptions of a UK University Based Coach Education  
Programme, and Impacts on Development and Employability**

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## Abstract

This investigation explored graduates' perceptions and experiences of a Higher Education (HE) coach education programme. It aimed to identify if this formal learning source had impacted upon attendees' development and employability, while uncovering information to potentially inform future provision. 10 graduate coaches who had completed coaching modules at a United Kingdom (UK) HE institution participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews. Graduate coaches highlighted a positive educational experience that developed critical analytical skills, assisted in their perceived accelerated development, and enhanced employability. Using Carl Rogers' work as a framework to analyse the data, it is demonstrated that the findings collectively offer implicit support for the adoption of a person-centred educational philosophy. Further research and debate is identified as necessary to ascertain whether the person-centred approach offers a legitimate and effective alternative form of coach education.

Key Words: Coach Learning, Higher Education, Person-Centred Approach

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## Introduction

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A desire to professionalise coaching has ignited substantial contemporary interest in coach education (Lyle, 2007; Trudel & Gilbert, 2006), driven by an increased demand for qualified coaches (McCullick, Belcher & Schempp, 2005), and greater accountability regarding appropriate vocational coaching standards (Gilbert & Trudel, 1999). This has resulted in broader opportunities to access coach education programmes, which have attained a heightened profile (Cassidy & Rossi, 2006), founded upon the notion that well educated coaches are more likely to be successful in practice (Hammond & Perry, 2005). Consequently, there has been a recent explosion in associated literature concerning the optimisation of how coaches learn (e.g., Côté, 2006).

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Coach learning research frequently indicates that the acquisition of knowledge and practice is a complex process requiring the pursuit of individualised and invariably ad-hoc developmental pathways (e.g., Cushion, Armour, & Jones, 2003). The development of coaches has therefore been described as both idiosyncratic and serendipitous (Abrahams, Collins, & Martindale, 2006; Nelson, Cushion & Potrac, 2006; Werthner & Trudel, 2006).

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According to Nelson et al.'s (2006) conceptual framework, coach learning occurs in formal (e.g., NGB awards, HE courses), non-formal (e.g., conferences, workshops), and informal (e.g., coaching experience) situations. Research in the domain of coach learning has frequently suggested that formal coach education has been a relatively low impact enterprise when compared to informal experiential learning (Gould, Gianinni, Krane, & Hodge, 1990; Irwin et al., 2004; Jones et al., 2003, 2004; Schempp et al., 1998). This might however be unsurprising when one

1 acknowledges that the total duration of time spent engaged within formal courses will  
2 inevitably be negligible in comparison to practical field experiences (Gilbert, Côté, &  
3 Mallett, 2006). Nonetheless, formal coach education remains a vehicle through which  
4 the standards of coaching provision could potentially be enhanced and as such is  
5 recognised as a promising means through which to professionalise sports coaching  
6 (Cassidy, Jones, & Potrac, 2004; Lyle, 2002, 2007; Jones & Turner, 2006).

7 Central to formalised vocational preparation have been the national governing  
8 body (NGB) coaching awards. These are sports specific coach education courses,  
9 operated at various levels (e.g., assistant coach, club coach, advanced coach) by  
10 organisations representing particular sports within a specified country (e.g., English  
11 Volleyball Association), with attainment indicating a certain level of technical  
12 competence, and standard of instructional ability. NGB's have understandably  
13 received considerable attention given the need for certification and quality assurance  
14 of coaching practitioners (e.g., Knowles, Borrie & Telfer, 2005). However, although  
15 NGB courses are undoubtedly an important learning avenue, it would appear that  
16 coaches have had, and value, other formal opportunities available to them (Nelson et  
17 al., 2006). For example, over the past decade there have been an increasing number of  
18 higher education (HE) institutions (i.e., academic context within which diplomas and  
19 degrees are usually studied at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, by adult  
20 learners, in colleges or universities) offering academic courses, focusing on the study  
21 of sports coaching. Lyle (2002) reported that 26 institutions were offering such  
22 courses by 2001, a figure that has since grown further due to an increasing trend  
23 towards the provision of sports coaching courses at British universities (Jones, 2005).  
24 Indeed, 245 UK HE level courses with sports coaching in the title were due to start in  
25 2009 (UCAS, 2009).



1 undertaken the coaching module pathway (i.e., the 4 successive modules shown in  
2 Table 1), as part of sports related degrees, studied at a particular United Kingdom  
3 based university, between 2000 and 2005. These years were selected, as during this  
4 period the same lecturer was responsible for the coaching pathway and delivered most  
5 sessions to the same curriculum design, ensuring a large degree of equivalence of  
6 experience among students.

7         The sample of coaches was recruited by sending an invitation to all students  
8 who had completed the *Advanced Coaching Study and Skills* module, and  
9 subsequently been awarded their degree, during the above period. Since the other  
10 coaching pathway modules were prerequisites for the *Advanced* module, this ensured  
11 that participants had studied all of the coaching modules available. Ten respondents  
12 agreed to participate.

13         Participants were 9 male and 1 female volunteers. Ages ranged from 22 to 41  
14 years, with an overall mean age of 26. Coaching experience prior to undertaking the  
15 coaching module pathway ranged from a few hours of informal participation coaching  
16 to several years of performance coaching (See Table 2).

17

### 18 *Course Programme Details*

19 The coaching module pathway was typically 3 years in overall duration, and featured  
20 two modules at Level 1 (*Introduction to Coaching Study and Skills* and *Coaching*  
21 *Practice*), one module at Level 2 (*Developing Coaching Study and Skills*), and one  
22 module at Level 3 (*Advanced Coaching Study and Skills*). Typical contact hours per  
23 module were 20 hours of lectures, 13 hours of tutorials/workshops, and 6 of  
24 practicals. A concise module outline, typical content, and assessment methods, are  
25 provided in Table 1.

1           The curriculum content broadly covered generic coaching theory related to  
2 associated sub-disciplines, allied theoretical frameworks, critical narrative  
3 descriptions of expert coaches, and applied implications for coaching practice. A  
4 variety of teaching methods were employed, from traditional didactic lectures to  
5 facilitated group discussions and use of problem solving scenarios, but always with an  
6 emphasis on active and interactive learning, and the frequent use of illustrative  
7 examples to link theory and practice. Assessment comprised entirely of extended  
8 written assignments centred upon theory based critical questions, tasks, specialised  
9 studies, and critical write-ups of individualised experiential learning from practical  
10 coaching environments. These modules were studied as part of several possible  
11 honours degree programmes. Participants in the present study were graduates of  
12 Coaching Science BSc Hons (n = 8) and Sport & Exercise Science BSc Hons (n = 2)  
13 courses.

14

#### 15 *Data Collection*

16 An interpretive research design was employed in the present study to elucidate the  
17 perspectives, interpretations, and beliefs of the participants in regards to their  
18 educational experience. As Jones and Gratton (2004) indicated, such an approach can  
19 be facilitative in interrogating the *how* and *why* of dynamic human realities, and  
20 deepening our understanding of related experiential and contextual influences.  
21 Furthermore, the qualitative inductive methodologies and emergent potentialities  
22 characteristic of such a design (Patton, 2002) are deemed well suited to gaining  
23 insight in areas of research where little is currently firmly established (Stearn, 1998).

24           One-to-one, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were utilised to gather data.  
25 Interview questions were open ended, such that respondents were invited to explore

1 certain aspects with the interviewer in a reflexive manner (Sparkes, 2002), and were  
2 not guided or compelled to respond in a certain way (see Appendix A – Interview  
3 Questions). Interviews were conducted at a location and time convenient to each  
4 graduate coach, and lasted between 50 and 70 minutes. Interviewees were reminded at  
5 the outset of confidentiality issues, their right to withdraw at any time, and that no  
6 right or wrong answers were expected. Prior to interview, each participant was  
7 required to provide informed consent.

8 An interview guide was constructed that was informed by previous coach  
9 education research, plus the broader educational literature, and designed to ensure that  
10 the aims of the study were met. The interview questions followed an identical  
11 sequence, plus were designed to be clear and included language likely to be familiar  
12 to participants (Patton, 2002). The main areas covered within the interview guide  
13 were demographic data, motivations, course content, delivery, assessment, and  
14 impact. Where necessary the interviewer took appropriate opportunities to seek  
15 clarification and utilised probes to gather further detail by asking the interviewee to  
16 elaborate on points (Gratton & Jones, 2004). Each interview was taped, and then  
17 transcribed verbatim, with only minor grammatical changes made that did not distort  
18 content meaning.

19

### 20 *Data Analysis*

21 The first author repeatedly read all transcripts in order to gain an overall sense of  
22 familiarity with the general content. Consistent with previous coach learning literature  
23 (Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke, & Salmela, 1998; Irwin et al., 2004; Knowles et al.,  
24 2006; Wiersma & Sherman, 2005), inductive content analysis was then employed,  
25 which allowed organised themes to emerge from the unstructured interview data.



1 Interview texts were first separated into distinct segments of information  
2 labelled meaning units, comprising of a single concept or idea able to stand on its  
3 own. Meaning units were then tagged according to the content involved. All identified  
4 tags were next listed and compared for similarities and differences, with meaning  
5 units exhibiting analogous tags being reorganised into broader categories referred to  
6 as lower order themes. In a similar process, lower order themes were then compared  
7 and contrasted so that those relating to similar issues could form higher order themes.  
8 A final level of analysis was then applied by grouping the higher order themes into  
9 two general dimensions.

10 Two hundred and fifty-two meaning units were identified as being both  
11 coherent and relevant to the area of investigation. The content analysis process  
12 resulted in the emergence of two general dimensions, five higher order themes, and  
13 twelve lower order themes. The titles of these themes, the number of meaning units  
14 pertaining to each, the hierarchical relationships between them, and which  
15 participants' meaning units contributed to each theme, are illustrated in Figures 1 and  
16 2.

17 In order to better understand these findings our interpretation of the data was  
18 informed and shaped by Carl Rogers (1951; 1969) theory of person-centred education.  
19 It has been demonstrated that Rogers' theory may represent a useful framework for  
20 making sense of practitioners' perceptions and experiences of coach education  
21 (Nelson, 2009). This appeared to present an appropriate analytical framework as the  
22 findings implicitly endorsed the adoption of a person-centred philosophy. Indeed,  
23 graduate perceptions and experiences of not only the positive aspects of the course,  
24 but also their suggestions for enhancing less favourable elements, seemed to support

1 the approach advocated by this theoretical alternative. Thus person-centred theory  
2 authentically offered an appropriate means of interpreting the outcomes.

3

#### 4 *Credibility & Transferability*

5 Methodological guidelines from Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Patton (2002) were  
6 followed in attempting to ensure credibility (i.e., that findings are trustworthy,  
7 believable, and reflect real experiences), and transferability (i.e., that findings have  
8 broader possible applications, and are perceived as illustrative of shared realities). For  
9 example, credibility was enhanced by only one interviewer being employed  
10 throughout, who was trained in qualitative research methods, had studied coaching  
11 within HE, was knowledgeable within coach education, and was a qualified active  
12 coach. Saturation of data relating to specific issues during the interviews was  
13 promoted via probing techniques and was more generally achieved when no new  
14 findings were uncovered by subsequent interviews. Member checking was employed  
15 by sending each participant a copy of their transcribed interview to comment upon (no  
16 corrections or elaborations were however received). An organised trail of records was  
17 maintained and an audit of these records was undertaken by a third academic with  
18 extensive experience in sport related research. This helped ensure that the study was  
19 managed and conducted appropriately. In regards to transferability, rich thick  
20 description (Cresswell, 1998) was employed in order to illustrate participants'  
21 experiences in a narrative approach, utilising key quotes to allow the reader to make  
22 their own generalisations to related settings.

23

24

## Results

1 Analysis of the results revealed two general dimensions relating to the  
2 graduates' *Learning Experiences* (see Figure 1) and the perceived *Outcomes of the*  
3 *Coaching Pathway* (see Figure 2), both of which will now be further explored.

4

### 5 *Learning Experience*

#### 6 *Motivations for HE Study*

7 Four graduate coaches indicated that a general passion for sport and a desire for the  
8 university experience was part of their initial motivation to enter the programme. But  
9 most did express clear career aspirations, which divided equally between those  
10 wishing to become coaches or to develop their coaching, and others desiring to  
11 become teachers of Physical Education.

12

13 I was working for an insurance company and I went to see a friend at  
14 University. I wasn't particularly enjoying my job at the time so when I  
15 got back I decided I would look into some courses. I did a sports related  
16 study at 'A' level, so that seemed to be the best thing to do as sports was  
17 my first love. It was the only area of interest that I wanted to do for a  
18 degree. (Graduate Coach 1)

19

20 I was coaching first...when I retired as an athlete I wanted to improve  
21 my coaching, so I went to university to do the coaching units. (Graduate  
22 Coach 2)

23

1 While Coach 1 indicated above that his initial motivations were not specifically  
2 vocationally focused, the following quote demonstrates that motives can alter during  
3 the course.

4

5 After I'd done the first Semester, I really enjoyed doing the coaching  
6 module and the physiology, so I tailored the rest of my degree around  
7 those topics. Yes, they really grabbed me and I discovered that this is the  
8 profession that I wanted to pursue. (Graduate Coach 1)

9

#### 10 *Course Delivery*

11 There was a mixture of positive and negative comments as regards the curriculum.  
12 The graduate coaches highlighted that the content was generally delivered at an  
13 appropriate standard for their needs, promoted a broad understanding of coaching, and  
14 provided sufficient opportunities to apply knowledge acquired to examples from their  
15 own sporting context.

16

17 There was a progression of curriculum over the three years and it gave a  
18 holistic understanding. I think generally it was pitched at a level that  
19 incorporated most of the people on the course. (Graduate Coach 5)

20

21 I was constantly applying things I learnt to my sport. If I was doing  
22 something already in my coaching, it helped me understand it more.

23 (Graduate Coach 8)

24

1 However, some comments indicated that the content was largely tutor driven, and that  
2 the coach educator might have better utilised student input in order for the curriculum  
3 content to be tailored more towards individual needs.

4

5 Quite heavily driven by the tutor...perhaps there could be more room for  
6 the students to have an input. (Graduate Coach 4)

7

8 Perhaps it could be tailored more towards the individual needs of  
9 students...make a curriculum based around their wants, needs,  
10 desires...and how it would optimise their development and take into  
11 account strengths and weaknesses. (Graduate Coach 6)

12

13 Irrespective of this shortcoming, the course was favourably reflected upon with the  
14 educator highlighted as having contributed towards the graduate coaches having had a  
15 positive experience. More specifically, the coach educator was identified as having  
16 qualities, such as enthusiasm, applying practical examples to theory, and building  
17 relationships, which were seen as adding value to the graduate coaches learning  
18 experience.

19

20 He coaches when he teaches you. I found his enthusiasm motivating... it  
21 is not all about the course – he was the right person for the course.

22 (Graduate Coach 3)

23

1 He tried to draw holistically on how this informs coaching, because he  
2 took the theory and put an applied slant on it and informed your  
3 coaching practice. (Graduate Coach 7)

4

5 The manner in which learning was facilitated may be best summarised as creating  
6 dialogue, with graduate coaches indicating that they highly valued learning from their  
7 peers, within small group situations, and through the provision of one-to-one support.

8

9 Small groups are a lot better, and the lecturer would make sure the stuff  
10 was going in, getting the whole class involved in giving ideas and  
11 answering questions. (Graduate Coach 2)

12

13 It was a kind of democracy by the time we left – we were involved in  
14 what we were learning as much as the tutor was. (Graduate Coach 3)

15

16 We were lucky our lecturer was good and everyone got on with him, and  
17 if you needed help or did not understand anything you could go and  
18 speak to him and he would always find time to help you out and point  
19 you in the right direction. (Graduate Coach 10)

20

21 A by-product of this facilitative process was that the coach educator seemed able to  
22 build strong and positive relationships, based upon the perception that he was  
23 approachable and available. This resulted in the establishment of informal mentoring  
24 relationships in at least two cases, which developed organically and persisted post-

1 course: 'Even now [the coach educator] mentors me – we exchange e-mails. I explain  
2 my frustrations about NGB stuff. He gives me good advice' (Graduate Coach 3).

3 The graduate coaches expressed the need for a direct link between theory and  
4 practice within the delivery to promote understanding. They also recognised that  
5 knowledge and experience interact and need to be balanced in terms of development.  
6 Despite recognition that theory was illustrated with practical examples in the  
7 classroom, some graduate coaches desired more opportunities to see or experience  
8 theory applied in practice.

9

10 Sometimes education can be detached from the practical side, but there  
11 needs to be that link so people can make their understanding between the  
12 two. (Graduate Coach 1)

13

14 Lessons were all very classroom based. No room to put your skills into  
15 practice. (Graduate Coach 9)

16

17 So it would appear important that coach educators strive to include practical  
18 coaching opportunities to supplement and support learning that takes place within the  
19 classroom.

20

### 21 *Nature of Assessment*

22 Notwithstanding the fact that there were no examinations associated directly with the  
23 coaching modules, the graduate coaches were keen to highlight the unpopularity of  
24 exams undertaken in other modules as part of their degree programme, and expressed  
25 the opinion that written assignments were more appropriate.

1

2 I think you get more out of someone with coursework rather than exams.

3 I do feel exams are needed to test – storing knowledge etc. Generally

4 coursework is better - gives you a chance to explain things. (Graduate

5 Coach 9)

6

7 The assignments associated with the coaching modules involved, amongst other

8 things, the writing up and evidencing of practical coaching experiences. The graduate

9 coaches inferred that they valued such assessment relating to, and giving credit for,

10 practical experiences, because it allowed assessment individualised to different

11 coaching contexts, provided flexibility in choice of focus, and promoted reflection

12 that facilitated the theory and practice link.

13

14 The assignment was set up so you had to document what you had done

15 at your workplace, and why you had taken that approach. With the idea

16 being that you provide theory to back up your behaviours, to provide an

17 understanding to the reader, and also to get engaged in reflection. So

18 anything you could improve - how could you do that? You are drawing

19 on theory - why you might approach it differently next time. (Graduate

20 Coach 4)

21

22 For me the assessment was on the right lines. It allowed you to think

23 about your delivery, so it made it specific to your context. It is essential

24 assessment is related to your own practice, and your coaching context,

25 and it did that. (Graduate Coach 8)



1

2 Although the graduate coaches valued the assessment methods used some felt that  
3 having the tutor practically assess their coaching performance, and provide specific  
4 feedback, could have enhanced the assessments.

5

6 Could do with some more practical, and maybe get the lecturer to  
7 actually watch you so they could assess us. (Graduate Coach 2)

8

9 It could be enhanced slightly by engaging in coaching with a group of  
10 in-house athletes, in which you could get feedback on site – how to deal  
11 with scenarios. (Graduate Coach 9)

12

13 When considering this finding, in light of those already presented, it becomes  
14 apparent that the graduate coaches wanted practical opportunities to be at the heart of  
15 their learning experience. Having outlined data pertaining to the graduate coaches  
16 thoughts about the course, we will now present findings in relation to their  
17 perceptions of its impact.

18

### 19 *Outcomes of Coaching Pathway*

#### 20 *National Governing Body Awards*

21 Students were compelled to gain NGB coaching awards as part of the requirements  
22 for the coaching modules. Some graduate coaches expressed negative opinions in  
23 relation to the NGB courses. These included insufficient time to adequately cover  
24 theoretical underpinning concepts (i.e., the *why*), a lack of appropriate focus in

1 relation to the novice coaches' needs, the issue that some awards were very easy to  
2 attain, and the additional burden of cost on top of academic expenses.

3

4 They were easy to pass. You were paying for it. The assessors pushed  
5 you through it even if you couldn't do it. (Graduate Coach 4)

6

7 Only so much information can be delivered on a week or weekend  
8 course – you skim over a lot. (Graduate Coach 8)

9

10 The positive aspects of NGB awards identified were that they provided sports  
11 specific knowledge and understanding, through the provision of drills and practices  
12 with which to enhance techniques and tactics. The following quote illustrates that  
13 NGB awards were seen as a useful source for the attainment of a practical baseline of  
14 coaching competence.

15

16 Doesn't give coaching methods. It gives coaching standards – a  
17 minimum really. Makes you aware of legislation, the do's and don'ts.

18 It's a very good practical guideline – but a baseline. All our operators  
19 work under this level of competence. (Graduate Coach 2)

20

21 Despite many of the earlier reported negative aspects, the majority of the  
22 graduate coaches recognised that the attainment of NGB awards was essential, as  
23 these, unlike the university degree, are considered to be an industry standard of coach  
24 licensing accreditation.

25

1           The degree in coaching isn't going to allow you to get a job – you  
2           have to get an NGB level of qualification. You have both of them at  
3           the end of the course. That's an added bonus hopefully, so you should  
4           be able to get a job. (Graduate Coach 1)

5

6    So it would appear that irrespective of the shortcoming identified, these practitioners  
7    saw the attendance of NGB courses as being a necessary element of their professional  
8    preparation and development.

9

#### 10   *Coaching Modules*

11   In contrast to the NGB awards, the graduate coaches considered that the coaching  
12   modules were more demanding, largely because they critically analysed issues in  
13   greater depth (i.e. addressed the *why*). The modules also were perceived to have  
14   provided them with transferable skills, including reflective practice, with which to  
15   promote further professional growth. Overall the coaching module pathway was  
16   thought to have enhanced both coaching practice and critical self-awareness.

17

18           I understand a lot more about what I do now. I can understand the  
19           theory – when they (athletes) say 'why' I can explain. Before I  
20           couldn't do that. (Graduate Coach 4)

21

22           It's given me the tools to facilitate my own development. (Graduate  
23           Coach 5)

24

1           Although the NGB awards were earlier identified as the required industry  
2 standard necessary for employment, having undertaken the coaching module pathway  
3 was perceived by the graduate coaches to be a benefit in regards to employability.

4

5           The coaching module pathway definitely helped. Definitely wouldn't  
6 have been so easy to get a job. It enhanced my employability, yes.

7           (Graduate Coach 8)

8

9           It's quite a difficult industry to break into at first. Helpful to have a  
10 degree. (Graduate Coach 5).

11

12          There were also indications that the coaching module pathway may have had more of  
13 a holistic impact upon the growth and development of some individuals, reflecting  
14 earlier comments regarding broad transferability of learning.

15

16          It also impacted on other areas of my life. Coaching methods applied  
17 to other scenarios. Even though I went into an area other than coaching  
18 I still think there was stuff I learnt at university that helped me.

19          (Graduate Coach 10)

20

21          When questioned as to whether they perceived that the coaching module  
22 pathway had accelerated their coaching development, the graduate coaches  
23 overwhelmingly responded positively. However, the added value was more apparent  
24 in differential emphases (i.e., in relation to coaching practice, coaching knowledge, or  
25 coaching status).

1

2 Definitely added value. The knowledge – the way I coach. I am better  
3 now than when I started. I have gained a lot of experience through  
4 University – the hours, and seeing other situations, and talking to other  
5 coaches about how to get around problems. (Graduate Coach 2)

6

7 Yes. Last year I was the assistant national coach, and also moved into  
8 performance management. Make way for the new coaches - more  
9 educated, sports science, holistic view of coaching. (Graduate Coach

10 3)

11

### Discussion

12 To date there has been a dearth of research into HE coach education, hence  
13 there is little understanding about who attends these courses, the reasons for enrolling,  
14 perceptions about content and delivery, and what impact, if any, attendance has on  
15 coaching development and the gaining of employment. The present study, therefore,  
16 aimed to begin addressing these issues through an exploratory, empirically based,  
17 investigation.

18 The majority of graduate coaches in the present study were initially motivated  
19 to undertake the coaching module pathway because they had clear career intentions.  
20 This finding might be best understood in terms of the ‘actualising tendency,’ which  
21 Rogers (1977) theoretically conceptualised as the central source of energy driving all  
22 human behaviour. In light of this, it could be suggested that these individuals, having  
23 identified a desirable career, were internally driven to pursue learning that could form  
24 either part of their professional preparation or ongoing development. An internal  
25 desire to achieve their goal, and actualise their potential, therefore offers a possible

1 explanation for their having enrolled onto the coaching module pathway. The cohort,  
2 however, exhibited different developmental emphases based upon diverse intended  
3 career destinations, encompassing performance and participation coaching contexts,  
4 as well as physical education teaching environments.

5         Some individuals expressed less career-focused reasons for undertaking  
6 extended HE study, such as a broad desire for the university experience or a  
7 generalised interest in sport. Such vocational uncertainty is perhaps unsurprising  
8 given that an increased proportion of the UK population are now undertaking  
9 university study as a result of government drives to widen and increase HE  
10 participation (Fallows & Steven, 2000). Nonetheless, we should conceivably not lose  
11 sight of opportunities for personal growth and eventual vocational engagement  
12 through being educated in an area of generalised interest.

13         The curriculum content of the HE programme under investigation might be  
14 best described as principally tutor driven with a standardised syllabus being delivered  
15 to all students. Whereas the majority of participant coaches reflected fairly positively  
16 on the courses' content, a proportion of the graduates desired greater input such that  
17 the subject matter would be tailored more to individuals' needs. This finding reflects  
18 the difficulties associated with designing a syllabus that caters for the diverse motives,  
19 previous experiences, and intended vocational destinations that are inherent in such a  
20 group. Indeed, the dangers of a purely tutor driven curriculum would appear to  
21 include covering topics that students are already familiar with, issues not directly  
22 relevant to individuals specific context, and learners not being able to exercise  
23 personal agency in prioritising areas of development (Gilbert & Trudel, 1999; Irwin et  
24 al., 2004; Jones et al., 2004).

1           Such a finding is inline with Rogers' (1969) belief that 'significant learning  
2 takes place when the subject matter is perceived by the student as having relevance  
3 for his own purposes' (p. 158). Although a coaching specific programme will  
4 inevitably have a degree of relevancy, this will of course be constrained by those  
5 factors already identified. The usefulness of any such programme, then, would seem  
6 to be dependent upon the educator's ability to cater for the inherent heterogeneity of  
7 its learners. In light of such issues, Rogers (1969) was of the opinion that course  
8 content, rather than being principally tutor drive, should be built around the individual  
9 and group purposes of its members. Person-centred theory would therefore appear to  
10 offer an alternative means of ensuring that coach education courses could meet the  
11 specific wants and needs of its group members.

12           Notwithstanding these negative comments, the graduate coaches did express  
13 positive satisfaction with regards to content progression, appropriateness for level of  
14 study, and provision of a broad overview of coaching. Furthermore, the course,  
15 although understandably predominantly theoretical in nature, was perceived by  
16 participants to effectively promote understanding, as it was easily related to practical  
17 coaching settings. It would as such appear that the educator, in this instance, managed  
18 to cover topics and present material that was considered by the students to be relevant.  
19 The effectiveness of the course was perhaps therefore largely attributable to the skills  
20 and qualities of the educator who designed and delivered it.

21           The graduate participants identified the coach educator as an important and  
22 positive influence upon their learning. The educator tapped into the coaches' own  
23 understandings and experiences, and fostered the peer sharing of information,  
24 practices, and knowledge by utilising questioning, stimulating group discussion, and  
25 drawing out illustrative examples. The graduate coaches in the present study

1 highlighted a preference for this teaching style, offering further support to the finding  
2 that coach learners highly value opportunities to discuss issues and share experiences  
3 with other coaches during coach education episodes (Cassidy, Potrac & McKenzie,  
4 2006; Culver & Trudel, 2006; Knowles et al., 2001; Wiersma and Sherman, 2005).  
5 The facilitative approach utilised by the coach educator was therefore inline with  
6 person-centred theory (Rogers, 1969), and presents evidence towards this being a  
7 valuable means of fostering effective coach learning environments.

8         Although the graduates appreciated the tutors' facilitative approach in the  
9 classroom, they did highlight the need for a greater direct link between theory and  
10 actual practice. Discussion of practical examples in the classroom alone was not  
11 perceived as sufficient. The coach learners in the present study-, as per McCullick and  
12 colleagues (2002, 2005), wanted opportunities to actually see the coach educator  
13 model behaviours by directly applying theory in a practical context. This finding can  
14 be further understood through Gusky's (2002) model of teacher change, which  
15 proposes that teachers' attitudes and beliefs are ultimately shaped by the experience of  
16 seeing knowledge successfully implemented within practice. This finding is also  
17 consistent with Rogers (1951) belief that observations are "exceedingly important  
18 resources" that present valuable learning opportunities (p. 465), and his suggesting  
19 that practical experiences should lie at the heart of professional education.

20         There has to-date been relatively little discussion about the assessment of  
21 coaches. In the present context coaches were presented with flexible assignment briefs  
22 that allowed the learners freedom to concentrate on pertinent aspects of direct  
23 relevance to their own development. The flexible nature of the assessment criteria was  
24 therefore compatible with a person-centred educational approach (Mearns,1997).  
25 Moreover, by awarding academic credit for supervised real world experiences, and



1 having learners critically reflect upon practical episodes within their own coaching  
2 context, the assessment strategy offered an attempt to address the recent call for  
3 having learners critically reflect upon practical episodes within their own coaching  
4 context (Cassidy et al., 2004; Cushion et al., 2003; Gilbert & Trudel, 2006).  
5 Encouragingly, the participants' comments demonstrated that they valued this type of  
6 assessment, and recognised the vocationally related worth of this approach over  
7 examinations.

8           Notwithstanding that the coaches appreciated the individualised nature of  
9 assessments, they did stress a desire for the coach educator to have critically analysed  
10 their coaching practice in context. Previous research has demonstrated that coach  
11 learners desire the opportunity to apply knowledge in a practical coaching scenario  
12 under the guidance of an educator who provides constructive feedback (Hammond &  
13 Perry, 2005; McCullick et al., 2005). A desire for individualised feedback is of course  
14 understandable as coaches are rarely presented with opportunities to gather  
15 information that could specifically inform their ongoing development. While Rogers  
16 (1969) recognised the value of feedback gained from others, he was also of the  
17 opinion that students should primarily evaluate the quality of their learning  
18 themselves. Indeed, self-assessment has been shown to form an important part of the  
19 experiential learning process that model coaches engage, so it would seem important  
20 that coaches develop the skills associated with this process (Gilbert & Trudel, 2001).  
21 While feedback from other practitioners was wanted, and would often be useful, it is  
22 also important that assessment, in its purest sense, does not act as a 'straight jacket'  
23 causing the social reproduction of practices at the expense of meaningful reflection.

24           Evidencing the attainment of NGB coaching awards was a compulsory  
25 condition for fulfilling the programme requirements. Coaching graduates were

1 consequently in a well informed position to comment on the similarities and contrasts  
2 between their educational experiences of formal coach education, as offered by  
3 NGBs, and that based at a HE institution. According to the participants in the present  
4 study, NGB awards largely concentrated on the *what* and the *how* of sports coaching,  
5 by providing attendees with a practical toolbox of sports specific drills and practices;  
6 a finding compatible with previous suggestions (e.g., Abraham & Collins, 1998). The  
7 university based coaching modules, on the other hand, were described as presenting  
8 the *why* of coaching through critical exploration of theoretical concepts to evaluate  
9 and underpin evidence based coaching practice. These findings further support the  
10 notion that NGB coaching courses might be more appropriately labelled training as  
11 opposed to genuinely educational endeavours (Nelson et al., 2006). NGB and HE  
12 coach education programmes certainly seem to feature surface and deep learning  
13 characteristics respectively (Entwhistle, 1981).

14           Despite criticising NGB awards for being perceived as intellectually  
15 undemanding and somewhat easy to pass, the graduate coaches did stress that these  
16 were able to provide tactical and technical awareness, plus a battery of practical drills,  
17 that undoubtedly facilitated their ability to become more involved in the practical  
18 coaching of sport. The NGB awards therefore appeared to supplement theoretical  
19 knowledge acquired through the university programme by providing students with an  
20 understanding of sport-specific issues. Although criticisms of NGB awards should not  
21 be ignored, it is worth noting that these courses remain the most important formal  
22 source of sport-specific knowledge, which is a key strand in the development of the  
23 knowledge structure of expert coaches (Abraham et al., 2006).

24           Those attending any university level generic coach education course would  
25 still thus be obliged to also undertake NGB awards, in order to not only become

1 officially accredited, but to acquire essential underpinning sport-specific  
2 understanding. The graduate coaches in the present study therefore appeared to  
3 benefit from simultaneous engagement with both formal learning avenues. Certainly,  
4 they not only felt that they collectively provided a greater breadth and depth of  
5 knowledge, but suggested that gaining both qualifications resulted in a whole package  
6 which contributed towards enhanced employability. Participants, however,  
7 specifically stressed the importance of acquiring NGB coaching awards,  
8 acknowledging that these are essential for gaining employment since they represent  
9 recognised industry standards. Despite this they did feel that the acquisition of a  
10 coaching related degree might help them to distinctively 'stand-out' in the job market  
11 above other coaching practitioners possessing only NGB awards. A pertinent critical  
12 question however relates to how fully employers truly understand the nature and value  
13 of coaching degrees given that they are a relatively new and largely unproven  
14 academic innovation (Lyle, 2002). Nonetheless, 100% of participants in the present  
15 study were employed at the time of interview, with 80% in coaching related  
16 occupations (see Table 2).

17         The coaching modules themselves were also perceived by most graduate  
18 coaches to have accelerated their development towards expertise through enhanced  
19 knowledge, practice and coaching status. The graduate coaches felt that attendance  
20 had helped them to begin developing theoretical underpinning knowledge, while  
21 concurrently engaging in sustained vocationally related deliberate practice, both of  
22 which have been identified as contributing towards expertise (Schempp, McCullick,  
23 & Mason, 2006). It would seem therefore that both NGB awards and university-based  
24 coach education programmes have an important role to play within the current coach  
25 learning climate.

## 1 Conclusion

2 This investigation aimed to explore graduates' perceptions and experiences of  
3 a HE coach education programme, and how this formal learning source impacted  
4 upon their development and employability, in order to uncover information that could  
5 inform future provision.

6 Findings appeared to strongly support a person-centred philosophy in relation  
7 to HE coach education. This raises significant questions regarding how to best deliver  
8 HE coach education, and perhaps more importantly the broad purpose of coach  
9 education itself. We have recently, for example, seen the introduction of competency  
10 based HE coach education (Demers, Woodburn & Savard, 2006; Trudel & Gilbert,  
11 2006), which is arguably the polar opposite of a person-centred approach. The former  
12 aspires to educate the coach in all pre-defined relevant areas, whereas the latter  
13 concentrates on individualised group learning and, perhaps more importantly, the  
14 developing of skills associated with ongoing learning.

15 Coach education conforming to Rogers' (1969) educational philosophy of  
16 teaching students how to learn would concentrate on developing coaches' critical  
17 analytical skills, allowing them to engage in ongoing development post-course  
18 through self-directed and reflective learning. Greater focus would be placed on the  
19 educational process, with the subject merely a vehicle through which to promote  
20 intellectual and personal development. Indeed, for Rogers (1969) knowledge is  
21 continuously evolving, rather than static, thus rendering the teaching of what is  
22 currently believed 'fact' as futile. Witness the explosion of contemporary research  
23 into sport science, during which traditional beliefs have been continuously challenged  
24 as new knowledge emerges. From a person-centred perspective, then, coach educators

1 should teach coaches to accept and critically engage with this ongoing developmental  
2 process.

3         Although results from the present study would appear to implicitly support the  
4 adoption of a person-centred approach to HE coach education, certain factors should  
5 be considered. While qualitative research methods may have provided a rich insight  
6 into the graduate coaches' views of the course, findings only represent the opinions of  
7 a small group of coach learners who experienced undertaking the coaching module  
8 pathway of a single HE institution, and cannot be considered representative of all HE  
9 coach graduates. Moreover, although interviewing the graduates post-course arguably  
10 tapped into the benefits of hindsight, this methodology only allowed for a 'snap-shot'  
11 of the coaches' thoughts following course attendance. Further research is therefore  
12 required before a person-centred approach is uncritically employed. Indeed, we are  
13 not intending to present this alternative approach as a panacea for problematic issues  
14 relating to HE coach education. However, it does represent an alternative  
15 philosophical approach to formal coach education that raises fundamental questions  
16 that challenge the traditional ideology, and therefore merits further exploration.

17         Even if person-centred education was established as an optimal approach,  
18 consideration needs to be given to the realities associated with trying to implement it  
19 in the current university climate and infrastructure. For example, although students in  
20 this investigation stated preferences for small group and one-to-one socially  
21 interactive learning environments, drives to widen participation in university study are  
22 leading to larger group sizes and greater use of virtual learning tools that are often  
23 depersonalised. Furthermore, calls for a more flexible and individualised curriculum,  
24 would be likely to come into conflict with frequently rather rigid learning outcomes  
25 associated with successfully passing modules validated within HE.

1 Irrespective of the teaching philosophy adopted, university level coach  
2 education arguably needs to identify its role in the developmental process by  
3 establishing its distinctiveness in the marketplace. Findings from this investigation  
4 support a heightened emphasis upon the underpinning *why* of coaching, the promotion  
5 of evidence based and critically reflective practitioners, and the cultivation of well  
6 balanced and highly employable ‘doers and thinkers.’ NGB awards alone seem  
7 incapable of producing such a powerful holistic educational package, although they  
8 undoubtedly play a crucial role in industrial training and certification. It would  
9 therefore appear that HE coach education has a legitimate and important role to play  
10 in raising future standards of coaching. Further research into this area is essential if  
11 we are to understand and optimise the development of coach learners attending these  
12 courses.

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1 Table 1  
2 *Module Outlines, Typical Content, and Assessment Methods*

Module	Outline	Typical content	Assessment methods
Introduction to Coaching Study and Skills (Level 1)	Examination of basic rationale behind principles of coaching; with reference to relevant research/literature.	The Coaching Process Coaching Styles	<b>Coaching Principles Assignment</b> - ethical behaviour - safe practice - dealing with emergencies/injury - effective coach-athlete relationships <b>Coach Shadowing Assignment</b> - general description - selected session plans - critical review of sessions - reflection upon learning experience - evidence of 15 hours coach shadowing
	Put into context by practical experience of 15 hours of coach shadowing placement.	Coaching Safely Coaching Children/Disabled Sportspeople	
	Introduce novice coach to a range of relevant topics that inform coaching process in early stages.	Reflective Practice	
Coaching Practice (Level 1)	Develop practical coaching abilities through gaining leadership level coaching qualification, and undertaking practical planning, delivery, evaluation.	The Active Body Technique Improvement Practical Planning Principles	<b>Job Advertisement</b> - prepare job advert/description for a coach - provide justification and rationale, with reference to relevant theory and literature - evidence of NGB coaching award at leaders level <b>Coaching Practice Assignment</b> - plans for 6 coaching sessions - plans in more detail for 2 sessions - 2 sessions delivered, evaluated, and confirmation by a qualified coach. - reflection on learning
	Examination of basic rationale behind practical application of coaching practices, and planning; with reference to relevant research/literature.	Basic Psychology All-Time Greats Philosophy/Methods Communications Skills	
	Introduce novice coach to range of relevant topics that inform coaching practice in early stages.		
Developing Coaching Study and Skills (Level 2)	Examination of key strategies, issues, and theories that relate to the further development of successful coaching skills.	Learning Theories and Motivation Self-Management, & Developing Prof Relationships Goal-Setting and Periodisation	<b>Written Report</b> - critical assessment of coaching practices - practical application of fitness and performance analysis - periodised coaching plan produced <b>Practical Coaching Portfolio</b> - goal setting process - general description/highlighted examples - evidence of 15 hours coaching undertaken - critical evaluation of programme and coaching - reflection upon learning - evidence of further coaching qualification
	Complement work towards a national governing body coaching award (at above leaders' level or equivalent), and includes 15 hours of logged coaching.	Performance Analysis Coaching Research - Trends and Ideas	
Advanced Coaching Study and Skills (Level 3)	Critical appraisal of advanced sports coaching theory, and personal development, as applied to own coaching context/specialised interests.	Current Issues Sub-Discipline Specialised Topics Problem Coaching Scenarios/Decision Making	<b>Coaching Theory Assignment</b> - problem coaching scenarios - specialised study of 2 specific sub-discipline areas - evidence of CPD <b>Coaching Practice Assignment</b> - evidence of 15 hours of practical coaching
	Gain a further national	Coach Education	

governing body award. Undertake a further 15 hours of logged coaching.	Coaching Effectiveness	- planning, delivery and evaluation of 6 week coaching programme - case study of 2 participating athletes - critical reflection on coaching progress
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**ALTERNATIVE VERSION OF TABLE 1 ALSO INCLUDED BELOW THAT FITS ON ONE PAGE IF REQUIRED**



Table 1  
*Module Outlines, Typical Content, and Assessment Methods*

Module	Outline	Typical Content	Assessment Methods
Introduction to Coaching Study and Skills (Level 1)	<p>Examination of basic rationale behind principles of coaching; with reference to relevant research/literature.</p> <p>Put into context by practical experience of 15 hours of coach shadowing placement.</p> <p>Introduce novice coach to a range of relevant topics that inform coaching process in early stages.</p>	<p>The Coaching Process</p> <p>Coaching Styles</p> <p>Coaching Safely</p> <p>Coaching Children/Disabled Sportspeople</p> <p>Reflective Practice</p>	<p><b>Coaching Principles Assignment</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- ethical behaviour</li> <li>- safe practice</li> <li>- dealing with emergencies/injury</li> <li>- effective coach-athlete relationships</li> </ul> <p><b>Coach Shadowing Assignment</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- general description</li> <li>- selected session plans</li> <li>- critical review of sessions</li> <li>- reflection upon learning experience</li> <li>- evidence of 15 hours coach shadowing</li> </ul>
Coaching Practice (Level 1)	<p>Develop practical coaching abilities through gaining leadership level coaching qualification, and undertaking practical planning, delivery, evaluation.</p> <p>Examination of basic rationale behind practical application of coaching practices, and planning; with reference to relevant research/literature.</p> <p>Introduce novice coach to range of relevant topics that inform coaching practice in early stages.</p>	<p>The Active Body</p> <p>Technique Improvement</p> <p>Practical Planning Principles</p> <p>Basic Psychology</p> <p>All-Time Greats Philosophy/Methods</p> <p>Communications Skills</p>	<p><b>Job Advertisement</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- prepare job advert/description for a coach</li> <li>- provide justification and rationale, with reference to relevant theory and literature</li> <li>- evidence of NGB coaching award at leaders level</li> </ul> <p><b>Coaching Practice Assignment</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- plans for 6 coaching sessions</li> <li>- plans in more detail for 2 sessions</li> <li>- 2 sessions delivered, evaluated, and confirmation by a qualified coach.</li> <li>- reflection on learning</li> </ul>
Developing Coaching Study and Skills (Level 2)	<p>Examination of key strategies, issues, and theories that relate to the further development of successful coaching skills.</p> <p>Complement work towards a national governing body coaching award (at above leaders' level or equivalent), and includes 15 hours of logged coaching.</p>	<p>Learning Theories and Motivation</p> <p>Self-Management, &amp; Developing Prof Relationships</p> <p>Goal-Setting and Periodisation</p> <p>Performance Analysis</p> <p>Coaching Research - Trends and Ideas</p>	<p><b>Written Report</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- critical assessment of coaching practices</li> <li>- practical application of fitness and performance analysis</li> <li>- periodised coaching plan produced</li> </ul> <p><b>Practical Coaching Portfolio</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- goal setting process</li> <li>- general description/highlighted examples</li> <li>- evidence of 15 hours coaching undertaken</li> <li>- critical evaluation of programme and coaching</li> <li>- reflection upon learning</li> <li>- evidence of further coaching qualification</li> </ul>
Advanced Coaching Study and Skills (Level 3)	<p>Critical appraisal of advanced sports coaching theory, and personal development, as applied to own coaching context/specialised interests.</p> <p>Gain a further national governing body award. Undertake a further 15 hours of logged coaching.</p>	<p>Current Issues</p> <p>Sub-Discipline Specialised Topics</p> <p>Problem Coaching Scenarios/Decision Making</p> <p>Coach Education</p> <p>Coaching Effectiveness</p>	<p><b>Coaching Theory Assignment</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- problem coaching scenarios</li> <li>- specialised study of 2 specific sub-discipline areas</li> <li>- evidence of CPD</li> </ul> <p><b>Coaching Practice Assignment</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- evidence of 15 hours of practical coaching</li> <li>- planning, delivery and evaluation of 6 week coaching programme</li> <li>- case study of 2 participating athletes</li> <li>- critical reflection on coaching progress</li> </ul>

Table 2  
*Coaching Experience Prior to Entry on the Coach Education Programme, and Employment at Time of Interview*

Participant	Coaching experience	Age range	Approximate hours per week	Paid/Unpaid	Years of coaching experience	Employment at time of interview
GC1	None					Coach Educator
GC2	National Standard Karate Coach	All	14	P	7	Sports Therapy Lecturer/Part-Time Coach
GC3	Swimming Teacher	All	4	P	3	Primary School Teacher/Part Time Coach
GC4	School Football Coach	U15	2	U	2	Trainee Police Officer
GC5	None					Cost Assistant in Solicitors
GC6	None					Football Coach
GC7	Tottenham Deaf Football Coach	All	6	P	2	PE Teacher/Part Time Football Coach
GC8	US Football Camp	Children	Holiday Job	P	2	Trainee Leisure Manager
	Football Coach	U14	2	U		
GC9	Football Coach	Senior	6	U	< 1	Sporting Opportunities Company Director
GC10	Football Coach	Children	10	P	1	Physical Education Teacher

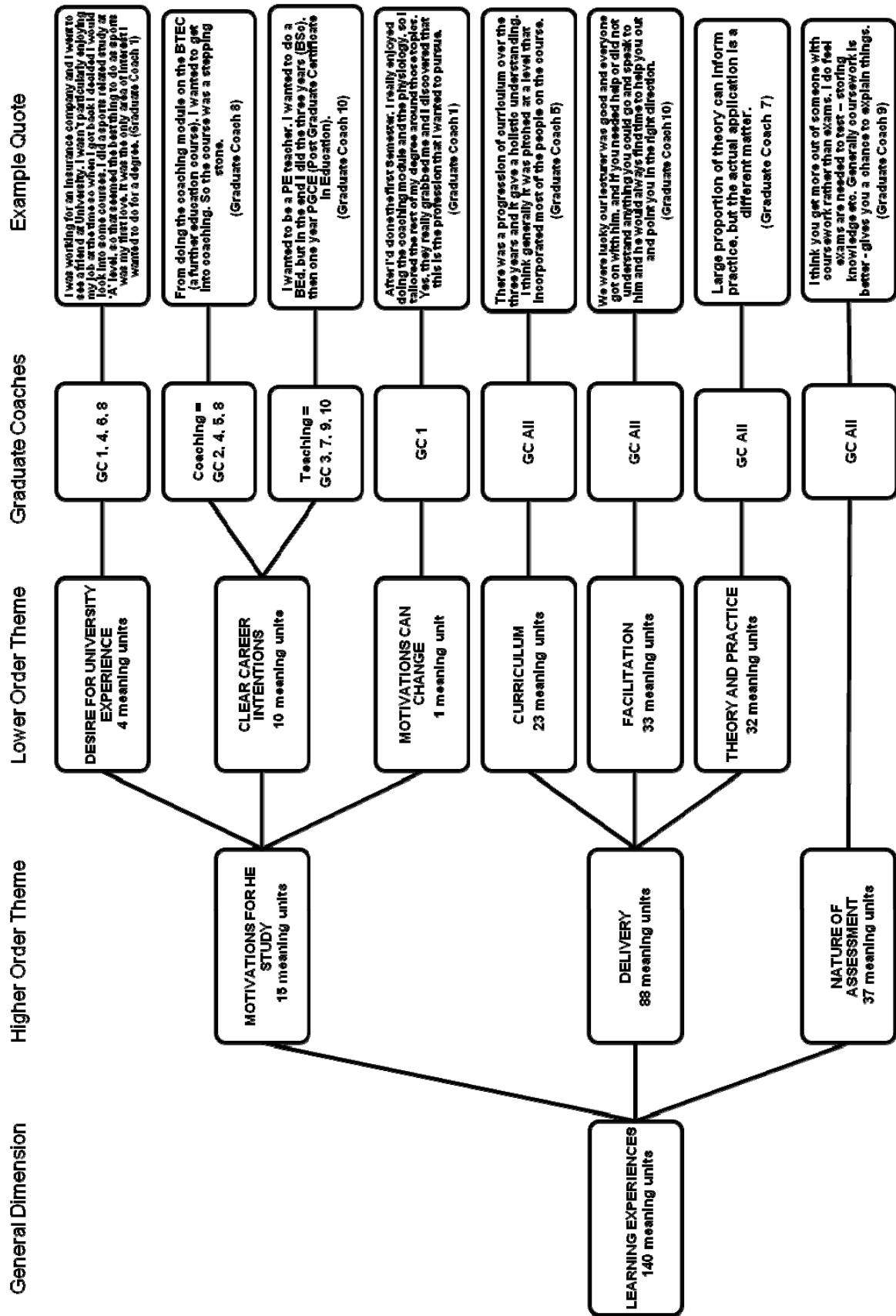


Figure 1. Themes, meaning units, and hierarchical relationships for general dimension of Learning Experiences.

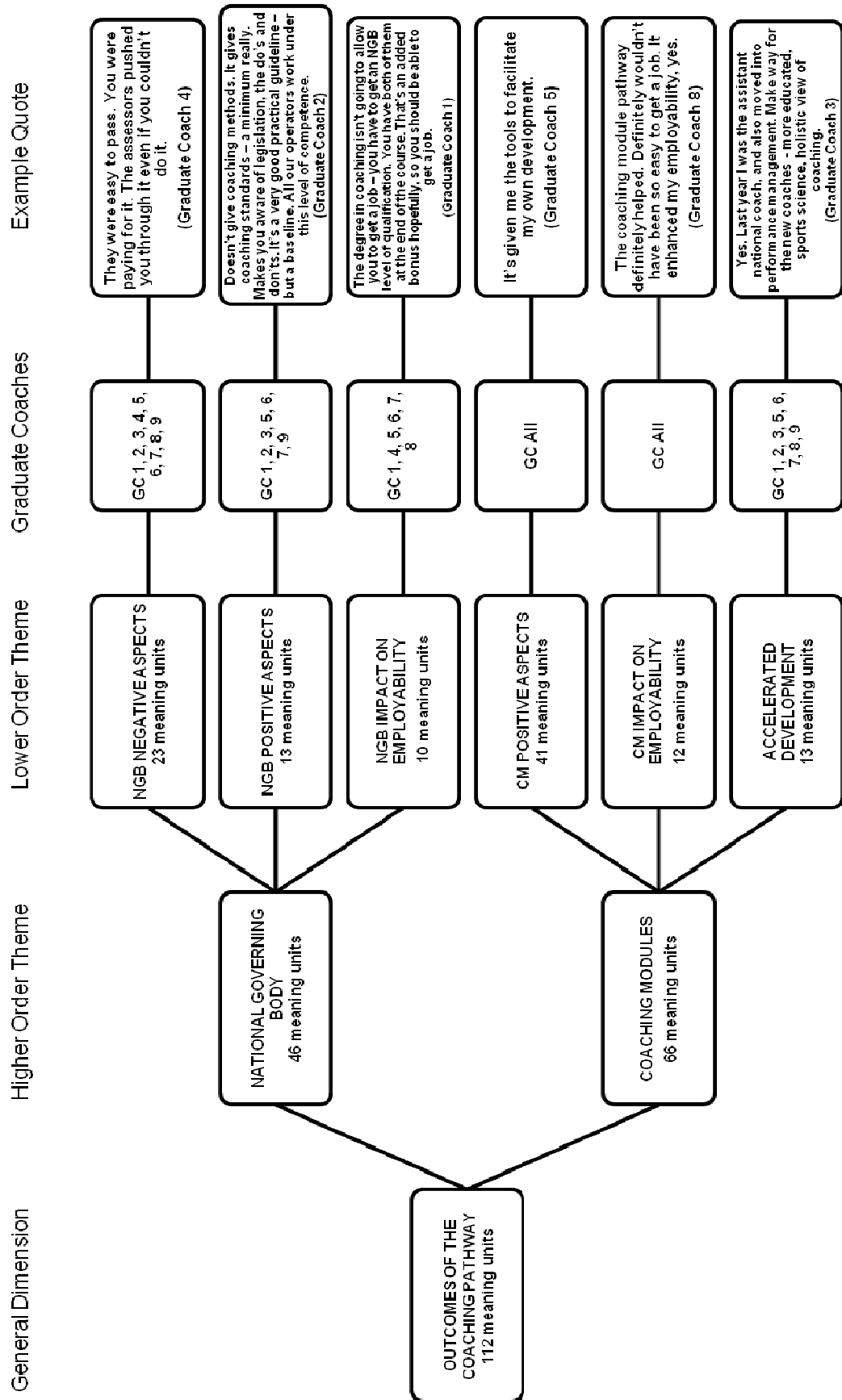


Figure 2. Themes, meaning units, and hierarchical relationships for general dimension of Outcomes of the Coaching Pathway.

## Appendix A – Interview Questions

## Motivation

- What motivated you to undertake a sports related degree?
- What factors motivated you to undertake the coaching pathway modules?

## Content

- Was there any assessment of your knowledge and coaching experience prior to each of the modules? (Views?)
- Were the modules focused around a set curriculum or the candidates' individual needs? (Preference? Views?)
- Did the tutor explain the importance of coaching theory in relation to coaching practice during the delivery of the curriculum content? (Is this necessary? Examples?)
- Was the content pitched at the right level to optimally promote your coaching development? (Views? Examples?)
- Were there any elements of the content you would have liked covered in greater or less detail? (What? Why?)
- What recommendations would you give to improve the content of the coaching pathway?

## Delivery

- How was the content typically delivered? (clarification probe = e.g., lectures, group discussion, sharing of ideas and experiences, etc) (elaboration probe = anything else?)
- To what extent did the delivery style match how you prefer to learn?
  - How do you prefer to learn?
- Were you given the opportunity to apply theory to practice? If so, how and in what context? (Examples?)
- What recommendations would you give to improve delivery of the coaching pathway?

## Assessment

- What methods of assessment were employed?
- What are your preferred methods of assessment and why?
- Were the candidates given individual feedback on their coaching development? (Examples?)
  - Feedback on coaching knowledge?
  - Feedback on coaching practice?
- What recommendations would you give to improve assessment of the coaching pathway?

## Impact

- How has the coaching pathway impacted upon your coaching knowledge? (Examples?)
- How has the coaching pathway impacted upon your coaching practice? (Examples?)

- How did your experiences of the coaching pathway compare and contrast with NGB coaching awards? (Views? Was there any overlap?)
- Do you think you are a better coach for having undertaken the coaching pathway? (Why?)
- In your opinion how has the coaching pathway impacted upon your employability?
- Do you feel that the coaching pathway has accelerated or added value to your coaching development? (How?)

Wrap up question

- Is there anything else that you would like to add in regards to your experience of the coaching pathway, and its subsequent impact on your development?